

CONCERNING THE MINISTRY'S ATTITUDE TOWARD SISTERS

Some on social media have used a short out-of-context excerpt from Witness Lee's *Life-study of First Peter*, omitting both context and balance, to support a spurious claim that he denigrates women. These sources begin with a sentence from the middle of a paragraph in his message that says, "Therefore, as a household servant submits himself to his master, so the wives should subject themselves to their own husbands" (199). They omit his quotation of 1 Peter 3:1— "In like manner, wives, be subject to your own husbands, that even if any disobey the word, they will be gained without the word through the manner of life of their wives"—at the beginning of the paragraph. Witness Lee's exposition simply pointed out that *in like manner* refers back to 1 Peter 2:18, which speaks of household servants being subject to their masters. The omission of the scriptural basis of his speaking by the social media commenters obscures the fact that in the quoted sentence Witness Lee was not putting forth his personal opinion but was expounding the Bible with the Bible. Their failure to engage directly with what the Bible says obscures the actual problem—they disagree with the Bible and hence with God.

Furthermore, in the very next message, Brother Lee gave a balancing word when he expounded 1 Peter 3:7, which says, "Husbands, in like manner dwell together with them according to knowledge, as with the weaker, female vessel, assigning honor to them as also to fellow heirs of the grace of life, that your prayers may not be hindered." Brother Lee noted that related to the husbands Peter used the same expression—*in like manner*:

This phrase seems to indicate that as servants are subject to their masters, and wives to their husbands, so the husbands, in like manner, should be subject to their wives. I believe that Peter intends this phrase to mean that not only are wives to be in subjection to their husbands, but also husbands to their wives...

If we see that a husband should honor his wife, we should realize that this implies some kind of submission to her. Submission always goes with honor. If you do not submit to a particular person, how can you honor that one? This would be impossible. Honoring someone always implies a certain degree of submission. As we have already pointed out, this is a word of balance. Husbands must honor their wives, and, no doubt, the wives must also honor their husbands. (205, 209)

Neglecting context and omitting this balancing word changes Witness Lee's meaning and emphasis dramatically. The mutual submission that he describes between husband and wife as fellow heirs of the grace of life is a beautiful expression of the transforming work of the Spirit.

To supply extraneous definitions to others' words distorts their meaning. For example, in the aforementioned message Brother Lee said, "This kind of word [1 Peter 3:1] is certainly contrary to the emphasis of the so-called women's liberation movement. That movement is against the Bible, for it is against God's ordination in His creation with respect to male and female" (199). It is misleading to use a contemporary online dictionary definition of *women's liberation* to accuse Brother Lee of supporting sexual discrimination and denial of full legal, economic, vocational, educational, and social rights and opportunities for women that are equal to those of men. In context, he was speaking about none of those things. Rather, he was affirming the Bible's teaching, which is consistent throughout, that in a marriage husbands are to be the head, and in the church and the Lord's work brothers are to take the lead (1 Cor. 11:3; Eph. 5:23; Col. 3:18; Acts 15:22; 1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:6). In the time in which he was speaking, the overthrow of such authority, particularly in marriage, was a major emphasis of the women's liberation movement. Those who object to what Witness Lee taught concerning 1 Peter 3 are actually attacking the teaching of the authors of the Bible—particularly the apostles Paul and Peter—and ultimately God's direct ordination (Gen. 3:16).

This does not mean, however, that males should behave in a domineering manner, and to imply that the ministry in the Lord's recovery teaches that they should is again dishonest. In *The Elders' Management of the Church*, Brother Lee links the authority of the husbands in the family mentioned in Ephesians 5:22-23 to the matter of love based on verse 25: "Husbands, love your wives even as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her."

Ephesians 5 mentions the matter of the husband as the authority. There it points out specifically that the husband is an authority. The way this matter is presented is quite unusual. It says that the wives have to submit to their husbands. We know that the other side of submission is domination, yet God never charges the husbands to dominate over their wives. He only charges them to love their wives. The husband is an authority; he is the head. But how should the husband behave as the head? How should he behave as the authority? Ephesians 5 clearly shows that the way is in love. (87)

Later, in describing how the elders in the church should exercise authority, he said, "An authority can only function in love. In other words, love is authority transformed. The love you exercise toward the brothers and sisters is the authority. Without this love it will not work to try to be an authority" (90). What is portrayed here is a beautiful picture of mutual submission and mutual sacrifice in mutual love.

The truth is that Witness Lee greatly valued the function of the sisters in the church life.

The sisters are vitally necessary in the church life, just as a mother is vitally needed in a family. In a certain sense, in the family life the mother is more important than the father. In the same way, in the church life, the sisters can be considered more important than the brothers. (*The Collected Works of Witness Lee: 1964, Volume 3, 98*)

Moreover, Brother Lee recognized the vital contribution of sisters, especially in their direct shepherding care for others.

Now I encourage you all to do the shepherding. Sisters, some of you have been in the Lord and in the church life for years, and you have attended many conferences and trainings. Surely you have received something from the Lord. Now is the time to exercise yourselves to use the grace you have received and the gift you have been given to care for others. (*All Ages for the Lord's Testimony, 37-38*)

The kingdom of God can come in its full manifestation only when the church's submission to God's government is complete, and the church is built up through mutual submission and the functioning of all the members to mutually supply one another (Eph. 4:16; Col. 2:19). This is what the Bible teaches, this is what Witness Lee taught, and this is what the ministry in the Lord's recovery is still teaching today.